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0521356032 - The Mind of John Locke: A Study of Political Theory in its Intellectual Setting

Ian Harris

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John Locke (1632–1704) is a central figure in the history of thought, and in liberal doctrine especially. This is the first major study of his thought to bring a range of his wider views to bear upon his political theory.

Every political theorist has a vision, a view about the basic features of life and society, as well as a technique which mediates this into propositions about politics. Locke's vision spanned questions concerning Christian worship, ethics, political economy, medicine, the human understanding, revealed theology and education. This study shows how the character of these wider concerns informed *Two Treatises of Government*, especially in respect of a view of divine teleology, and situated a distinctive view of politics which treated the state and the church in parallel terms. Locke's political theory suggested the revision or replacement of many prevailing positions. It also indicates the indivisibility of thought, for in its turn it contributed to the further development of his vision. By connecting his wider interests with his political thought, this volume offers the first integrated study of the mind of John Locke.

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*A study of political theory in its  
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## Preface

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John Locke was a thinker of great range and power. His mind spanned questions concerning the church, ethics, political economy, medicine, the human understanding and education. The object of this study is to show how the character of these concerns informed his political theory, and also how in its turn the latter affected his subsequent views. Locke's political thought at once embodied the power of a wider vision and contributed to its further development.

The subject matter affords ample occasion for the present study. It also suggests that a distinct manner of writing about political theory is appropriate here, one which does justice to substantive continuities of thought across the conventional boundaries of discourse. Locke's political thought figures as the product of a wider vision of existence. Of course, it is not that alone: in particular, it embodies a technique through which general views were mediated into propositions of a specifically political relevance. This study, then, concerns both vision and technique in order to understand the character and relations of Locke's political thought.

Its treatment is restricted to matters fundamental to this task: a wider project would no doubt embrace much besides. But it is true in another and a more important sense that there is always much to add, and there is no place more appropriate than a study of a developing mind to remark that books are evidence of a writer's footprints rather than his destination.

*Middlesbrough,  
29th August, 1992*



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## Preface to the revised edition (1998)

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*The mind of John Locke* tells a story about how a conception of politics arose within the mind of one man, showing how that conception emerged from his wider thought, and how, in its turn, it affected that thought. It was a conception about political order, in both its civil and ecclesiastical aspects, and one in which that order served certain ends. The ends that Locke presumed, as we would expect from a man of his time, embraced the stability of civil interests and the salvation of the Christian's soul. The way in which his arguments conducted him to his conclusions, and accordingly the character which the conclusions themselves assumed, were rather contrary to contemporary expectations. The present volume considers how these aspects of Locke's political argument developed.

In other words, it shows an individual dealing with some of the intellectual problems and resources of his day, and producing from them a distinctive set of arguments. The arguments on which the study focusses especially are those of Locke's political thought, but the range of intellectual interests that inform the latter is so wide that Locke, and the student following him, pursued substantive continuities of thought across disciplinary boundaries and across particular situations. Hence the subject of the book is the emergence of a pattern of political argument out of a much wider range of thought, and the effect it exerted in its turn on some aspects of that thought. Its opening five chapters consider the formation of Locke's vision, whose focus includes political problems and so a political disposition; chapters six and seven show how Locke combined this vision, with other items, to form his political theory, thus providing complementary views of the state and the church. The last three chapters show the effects of Locke's political position upon some of his wider views.

The present study is thus both conceptual and historical in its emphases. Its attention to argument, and its corresponding sense of the connection and breadth of Locke's thought, differ somewhat from the

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studies which are only contextual. This is because the thrust of Locke's thought was much broader and more continuous than any situation narrowly conceived, and correspondingly his arguments cannot be fitted satisfactorily into the specifications of ideology, or within any one practical situation or sequence of situations. Like every other writer, Locke's work was done within such a sequence, but his response to them produced cumulatively an intellectual vision whose range and power identified a pattern of general argument. Locke meant to offer general explanations, and plainly he did so in a way that implies a general significance in his thought. This book differs, too, from some specimens of the historiography of philosophy in its attention to the relations of argument to an historical situation, so that it deals not just in concepts, but also in the assumptions and larger intellectual ambitions that animated them, and it also avoids an undue preoccupation with present-day categories and the matching tendency inexplicitly to edit its subject-matter to fit their criteria of conceptual interest. The book is an historical study in which attention to conceptual architecture is balanced by interest in conceptual change, and a sense of the practical situations in which Locke wrote is balanced by a sense that he approached each one with a set of general views and left it with those views further developed, whether by way of addition or revision.

This book, then, differs somewhat in method from some specimens of the dominant approaches to intellectual history. That being so, some might wish to preface it with a long discourse about method, or even to write a number of methodological articles. The present writer, partly perhaps from an excess of modesty or reticence, certainly in part from a sense that the case was obvious, but chiefly from concentration on the theme before him, did not emphasize these points when this book was first published. Instead, he contented himself with a few introductory remarks that seemed especially relevant to the book he had written. He has no wish at present to develop claims about method, not least because he inclines to think that a variety of *appropriate* approaches produces complementary results, and because he feels that too often the opposite appears to be the case because the proponents of different approaches insist too strongly on an exclusivity of method and, whether implicitly or explicitly, believe in the sufficiency of their own approach. But there is always much to be learnt from others (though not always what they think is to be learnt from them).

Certainly, much in Locke's thought has suffered relative neglect and, so far as anyone can ever be sure about such matters when a secondary literature has been under way for many years, the present writer was surprised by the number and centrality of the new lines of interpretation

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that his investigation suggested. It was striking, for instance, that so little had been said about the close links between Locke's conceptions of church and state, in both early and later versions. The literature about Locke's political thought and about his view of the human understanding diverge, but it was surprising that there had been so little emphasis on the general ways in which the two are interconnected. It was striking that an assessment of what type of church was needed (whether unitary or voluntary) and what type of civil government (whether absolute or constitutional) turned on an assessment of human intellect and character. It seemed even more so that Locke's view of the understanding involved teleological assumptions, which he developed in a form central to his mature account of civil government and inferentially to its logical pendant, his view of the church. This form, the 'great Design of God', extraordinarily, has attracted no comment elsewhere. That Locke's mature views on the understanding, church and state, not excluding the lacunae in them, found a logical complement in his revisions to educational opinion and Christian doctrine also required emphasis. The general point on which these lines of interpretation converged was that though Locke had addressed a number of topics it was easier to distinguish than to separate these. The separation was one of convenience, or of the division of intellectual labour that a later day approved, rather than a discontinuity of conceptual content.

In an obvious sense, the approach of the present volume suggests that it might have been expanded further to give full attention to every aspect of Locke's writings. The present writer wishes he had been able to do so, but his sense of the limitations of time in the era of Research Assessment Exercises dictated otherwise. The book focusses on an intersection of central interest, the relations between Locke's political thought and his other concerns. This focus means that it omits some matters and explains others no further than seemed vital in relation to its primary interest. For instance, though the book discusses some of the origins of Locke's views on the human understanding, it does so only so far as this seems immediately necessary to elucidate his political thought and what bears on that thought. The book is not a total presentation of Locke's thought, still less an attempt at biography, intellectual or otherwise. Having said this, it is still true that it does integrate Locke's interests to a marked degree, and comes closer to presenting properly his thought in general than many books that purport to perform these functions. Some day the present author may say more. For now his preoccupations with political theory and with editing *Two Treatises of Government* for the Clarendon edition of Locke's works,

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besides parallel concerns with Burke, including a volume in the Clarendon edition of *his* works, suggest an agenda of some duration.

The approach of this book to the historiography of political thought makes the genre more demanding than some for the writer and readers alike. For the former, the scale of a book which sets out a large story like the present one prevents the writer from explicitly rehearsing conceptual possibilities in the manner of the historiography of philosophy. Perhaps regret is unnecessary in that the book focusses more sharply on the story that actually arose. More personally, the effort of at once beginning a teaching post and producing two-thirds of the book in three years exhausted him, and so led to an inability to do some things that should have been done. One reviewer complained that in the absence of chapter titles 'the only way of finding out what the chapters are about is to read them'. That reviewer was candid, but his remark made a relatively young author realise that some reviewers find out what is in books by methods other than reading them, and so caused a horror that time has softened but not obliterated. The criticism, indeed, should have been taken further, because to read the book as a whole involves the intensive attention characteristic of conceptual studies and the extensive attention associated with narrative. It should have offered the reader more assistance than in fact it did in its first incarnation. It goes some way to doing so now, not least because the present version contains the many small revisions that the kindness of my editor, Mr William Davies, has made possible. I should also like to thank Mr Timothy Stanton for his help with some corrections.

*Leicester*  
6 November 1997

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## Acknowledgements

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To compile a list of acknowledgements properly would be to write part of one's own biography, and, interesting though this might be to the writer, the reader may prefer to know who and what helped to make this particular book. What follows, accordingly, is incomplete but not the less for that an expression of gratitude. John Dunn, besides advising and encouraging, has read every draft of my writings about Locke, and but for his support at a crucial juncture the results, had there been any, would have been much poorer. Maurice Cowling has been generous in many ways. Richard Tuck's help has not been the less thoughtful for being apparently casual. The direction the present book has taken owes a good deal to the candid probings, both written and spoken, of Michael Ayers, and to his intellectual tolerance too. Tom Pink read the penultimate draft and improved it with a number of constructive suggestions. But none of these is responsible for any errors or omissions which may remain in the text. The same is true of those who have discussed Lockean matters with me, read preceding pieces of mine or who have directed me to information I might otherwise have missed, not least because they may not recognise the results their interventions produced: Hans Aarsleff, John Day, Peter Glazebrook, Robert Heuston, Tim Hochstrasser, John Hoffman, Mark Knights, Paul Langford, John Rogers, Henry Schankula, Quentin Skinner, Sandy Stewart, Ian Tipton, John Walsh, David Wootton, Keith Wrightson, Jean Yolton and John Yolton. William Davies has been a most considerate, as well as a very patient, editor on behalf of Cambridge University Press. A debt infinitely greater than all of these combined, which is difficult to state and which I can never repay, is recorded very inadequately in the dedication.

The present work is the outcome of a process which has involved many other sorts of activity and whose destination, as planned originally, would have been quite different. Accordingly a great many institutional debts have been incurred in producing it, and an acknowledgement here stands for something besides support for this

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book. First in time came a state research studentship, administered by the British Academy, and augmented both by generous subventions from the I.C.I. Educational Trust and by the munificent patronage of a scholarship on Dr Lightfoot's foundation under the old regulations. The Master and Fellows of Jesus College, Cambridge, by electing me to a research fellowship, allowed this and much else to be begun. The University of Leicester provided conditions under which it has been possible to further it. Travel grants necessary to undertake research have been provided by Peterhouse and Jesus College, Cambridge, the Prince Consort and Thirlwall, and Worts Funds of Cambridge University, the I.C.I. Educational Trust and the Research Board of the University of Leicester. A good deal of the research embodied here drew upon the patience of librarians as well as the resources of libraries: thanks are due to the staff of the Bodleian Library, Oxford (especially Duke Humfrey's Reading Room), Cambridge University Library (especially the Rare Books Room), the Library of St John's College, Cambridge, the British Library, Middlesbrough libraries (especially the reference library), the Pierpont Morgan Library, New York, the Houghton Library of Harvard University, the Beinecke Library of Yale University, the Newberry Library, Chicago, the Henry E. Huntington Library, Somerset County Record Office, the Public Record Office and Leicester University Library (especially the Inter-Library Loan department). The Old Library at Jesus College, Cambridge has a special place as a constantly accessible collection of seventeenth-century works. For permission to quote manuscript material, thanks are due to the Keeper of Western Manuscripts at the Bodleian Library and to the directors of the British Library, the Houghton Library, the Beinecke Library and the Pierpont Morgan Library and to the Master and Fellows of St John's College, Cambridge.

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## A note on citations

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### 1 *Citations in the Text*

The titles by which Locke's works (and others) are cited in the text derive from usage common to scholars rather than to bibliographical exactness. For this there are several reasons. Firstly, many seventeenth-century titles furnish sufficient material for a modern preface, and it would be cumbersome (as well as needless) to reproduce them in full. Thus, instead of referring to *Two Treatises of Government: In the Former, The False Principles and Foundation of Sir Robert Filmer, And His Followers, Are Detected and Overthrown. The Latter is an ESSAY concerning The True Original, Extent, and End of Civil-Government.*, we content ourselves with writing about *Two Treatises of Government* or even *Two Treatises*, and in a like way to Locke's *Essay concerning . . . Civil-Government*. Secondly, several of the writings examined here were not published by Locke himself, and the titles given to them by their modern editors do not always accord with the manuscripts. It would be a pedantic extravagance to refer to them by their manuscript titles when they are already familiar by other names. Thirdly, there is one case where the usage of scholars is perhaps less scholarly than it ought to be, for they refer to Locke's *First Treatise* and *Second Treatise*, and so suggest that the two parts of *Two Treatises of Government* are separate enterprises rather than 'Book One' and 'Book Two' (as Locke called them) of a single volume. The prevalence of this usage makes it useless to attempt a better replacement, and so (as in so many cases) people must condone what they cannot approve.

### 2 *References*

The notes and references are gathered after the text but before the bibliography. They are given according to the unlovely but economical Harvard form. Two sorts of exemption have been made. Firstly, Locke's works have been cited by short title, so that the reader can see immediately which texts are being adduced. Secondly, a few classical works, which have no real publication date and whose appearances here

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would be unaffected by citing critical editions, are given their titles (Thus: Plato *Republic* rather than Plato (n.d.)).

The bibliography contains fuller versions of the titles of Locke's writings along with publication details, as well as listing manuscript sources consulted. The list of other works, both primary and secondary, gives references for works *cited* rather than providing a rather more comprehensive list of works *read*.

### 3 Dates

All dates are given according to the Old Style, except that the year is reckoned as beginning on 1 January.